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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 002444

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV IR IZ

SUBJECT: WASIT GOV: PEOPLE WANT CHANGE

Classified By: Senior Advisor Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) "People want change," said Wasit Governor Abdel Latif Turfa in a July 29 conversation with Senior Advisor Gordon Gray and PRT Team Leader. Although Turfa declined to offer any prediction over election results, he said the Sadrists were unpopular, while Prime Minister Maliki had gained Sunni support due to GOI operations against Shi'a militants. Turfa said that "American pressure" was necessary to pass the elections law, but speculated over the benefits of postponing the elections until 2009. End summary.

People want change

¶2. (C) "People want change, the same as is happening in your country," Turfa said when asked about provincial elections. He pointed to the 18 nominal independents on the Provincial Council (PC) as evidence of Wasit's unique political character but declined to offer any prediction of electoral results, saying only that "everything could change in the last hour." Turfa estimated that 50 to 65 percent of eligible voters would participate in the elections.

Sadrists lost support

¶3. (C) Turfa said that the Sadrists had lost much of their popular support over the past year. "They used to have six ministers and 28 members in parliament, and what did they accomplish? I don't think they will get a second chance." A central weakness of the Sadrists, according to Turfa, is that the movement is controlled by the Najaf office: "Some members may want to meet the Americans, but that is prohibited."

Foreign and sectarian tensions

¶4. (C) Asked about foreign influence in the elections, Turfa highlighted Iran's close relationship with ISCI and the possibility of Sunni interference: "The Sunni countries don't like the Shi'a religious parties. At the same time, the Shi'a need to realize that in the Arab world they are a minority surrounded by a Sunni sea." Turning to sectarian issues, Turfa said that recent GOI offensives against Shi'a militants had increased PM Maliki's popularity among Sunnis. "I recently spoke to the deputy governor of Salah-ah-din," Turfa added, "and he said 'If Maliki and I were running on the same ballot, I would vote for him!'" If Iraq's Arabs were unified, he explained, there would be no debate over the provincial elections law. Turfa said that he was optimistic the law would eventually pass due to "American pressure," but speculated over the benefits of postponing the elections. "Why not keep elections until 2009?" he asked, "Some provincial governments are successful."

Good relationship with GOI

¶5. (C) Turfa characterized Wasit's relationship with the central government as "good," pointing to the establishment of a governors' council by Ali Alaq. However, he added that "political interests" within the ministries have a negative impact on provincial development and said he and other governors wanted more autonomy over investment and financial management.

Comment

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¶6. (C) Turfa, like other unpopular southern governors, sees the advantage (to incumbents) of delaying provincial elections until the next year. Many contacts share his assessment of a southern Iraq whose loyalties have nearly flipped over the last year, with declining Sadrists support and a growing personality cult centered on Prime Minister Maliki. End comment.

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